

The taste of bread



Emma Benany.



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By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **October 15, 2009, 2:00 am**

Darb 1718's new show, "Bread, is one of the most cohesive and ambitious exhibitions of the year. The show explores the importance of this commodity in terms of being the building block of every society, focusing particularly on Egypt.

Egypt was at one point in 2008 on the brink of a major political calamity; the country was struggling to cope with grain shortages and, as a result, at least seven people were trampled to death in public bakery queues. This tragedy firmly established bread as the glue that binds the country together. Bread is the simplest and most basic of subject matters that has been extensively examined in the recent series of exhibitions in Cairo.

The exhibition hosts the works of 12 artists, varying from the internationally renowned to graduate art students. The level of talent and originality is impressive. The displayed work - ranging from painting, installation and photography to video - is a calm collection of thoroughly thought out concepts; nothing in here is too complex or 'artsy.'

The first work that greets the viewers is an installation by Youssef Limoud, titled "Hungry after Gazzar. Limoud's installation nods to a painting titled "Popular Course created by Hady El-Gazzar in 1948 which depicts a group of poor, forlorn Egyptians standing in a queue with an empty metal plate placed in front of each other. The plates obviously signify poverty, hunger and need.

Fifty years later, Limoud uses El-Gazzar's painting to illustrate how nothing much has changed. By reducing the painting into black and white lines on the wall and replacing the plates with an endless row of inedible bread loaves, Limoud brings this predicament into a new alarming perspective. The use of real bread creates an even larger distance from Limoud's vision of the Egyptian people; barely existing and worn out ghosts.

Jasmine Soliman's abstract paintings are equally inviting. Created by mixing wheat and bran with paint, her works are reminiscent of the zip paintings of the late Mark Rothko, and they elicit the same kind of sadness. The monotone colors with which the works are developed elude a serenity that is simultaneously contrasted with the strain of the visible textures of the used materials. The seemingly simple paintings are in fact quite complex.

Mohamed Khalifa titles the next alluring piece "Bread & Crumbs; a large sized photograph of a full loaf of bread set against a black background. Khalifa's idea is simple; bringing to life what he believed is the dream of poverty-stricken Egyptians: a full and fresh loaf of bread. The image itself is beautiful, not due to how the loaf looks appetizing or inviting; the loaf looks like a full moon, out of reach and unattainable.

Despite the excellent caliber of work on display, the strongest works in the show are the video pieces by Moataz Nasr and Emma Benany. Nasr's piece, titled "At Death's Door, is a video of a loaf of bread shot from inside a stove, detailing the moment it's placed inside as dough till it's cooked and ultimately flattened. The three-minute video is extraordinary in how it depicts this process: the loaf of bread rises and falls as though it's a living organism. The breathing movement of the bread in the red furnace is mesmerizing; it's quite difficult to stop staring at the projection until it's completely over. "At Death's Door is an exquisitely simple and direct work of art.

Emma Benany's interactive video is just as enlightening; her work is both intelligent and creative. The projection of her video is connected to loaves of bread placed on a ledge in front of the screen. The viewers would place their hand on one of three loaves of bread: the left one is sold for a LE 1, the loaf in the center went for 20 piasters and the far left went for 10 piasters.

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Upon pressing on the loaf in the same manner of placing a hand on a holy book to swear an oath, the projection changes accordingly. With the one pound loaf, it shows a somewhat relaxed production of bread, a systematic mode of sales and a seemingly more satisfied customer. As the price of bread gets cheaper with the 20p and 10p loaves, the projections get louder, scarier; the processes of production gets more chaotic and monstrous. The idea is straightforward and inspiring, managing to jolt the average viewer out of their comfort zone.

Other artists participating in the exhibition include Ayman El-Simary, Atef Ahmed, Khaled Serour, Shaymaa Aziz and Hesham El-Zeiny, all of whom show impeccable bodies of work. It cannot be stressed enough: this show is a must see.



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